



**National Bushfire CRC
Enhancing Volunteer Recruitment and Retention
Project (D3)**

**Occasional Report Number 2004:1
Exit Interviews and Surveys (EISs) for
Volunteers**

**Jim McLennan
28 April 2004**

Bushfire CRC
School of Psychological Science
La Trobe University, Bundoora 3086
Tel: 613 9479 3704; Fax: 613 9479 1956

Executive Summary

- Recruiting and training volunteer firefighters is costly. It is clearly in the interests of rural fire services to minimise attrition rates.
- In order to minimise attrition rates it is necessary to know the reasons why volunteers leave.
- Many large organisations routinely conduct exit interviews or questionnaire surveys of staff who resign. Most rural fire services do this with their career staff.
- Only one Australian rural fire service routinely surveys volunteers who resign (NSW RFS). Two others are considering introducing an exit interview/survey procedure: (SA CFS and VIC CFA).
- Reanalysis of the data from a CFA one-off mail exit survey in 2000 suggested that approximately one-third of resignations are probably associated with leaving the area (Woodward & Kallman, 2001).
- Of the remaining two-thirds, the reasons given by Woodward and Kallman's respondents were (in descending order of frequency): (1) time demands (work, family, personal), (2) negative Brigade issues (lack of recognition, conflict, lack of opportunity), and (3) training requirements (time, lack of access).
- Conducting routine exit interviews and surveys requires commitment of resources. If an exit interview or survey procedure is to be introduced two issues must be addressed: (a) ensuring honesty of responses, and (b) putting the information gathered to practical use.

Overview

One approach to maintaining adequate numbers of volunteer firefighters is to minimise attrition. Many large organisations track trends in attrition by conducting routine exit interviews or questionnaire surveys of staff who leave. This Report (a) summarises what is the current practice of Australian rural fire services, (b) summarises the findings of an exit survey by CFA, and (c) discusses general principles of utilising exit interviews and surveys to monitor the reasons why volunteers leave their organisation.

Australian Rural Fire Services and Exit Interviews and Surveys of Volunteers

The situation as at April 2004 across Australian rural fire services is as follows:

ACT Emergency Services Bureau (approx. 600)	No	No immediate plans to introduce
NSW Rural Fire Service (approx. 69,000)	Yes	Survey Questionnaire (Attachment 1)
NT PFES (approx. 250)	No	No immediate plans to introduce
Qld F & RS (approx. 45,000)	No	No immediate plans to introduce
SA Country Fire Service (approx. 16,000)	No	Telephone survey under consideration (Attachment 2)
Tasmania FS (approx. 5,000)	No	No immediate plans to introduce
Victoria CFA (approx. 60,000)	No	Telephone or questionnaire survey under consideration
WA FESA (approx. 28,000)	No	No immediate plans to introduce

Thus, of the eight rural fire services, only NSW Rural Fire Service currently utilises a routine exit survey, while SA Country Fire Service and Victoria CFA are considering introducing a procedure.

The CFA exit survey in 2000

CFA conducted a survey of volunteers who exited between 1 March 2000 and 23 June 2000 (Woodward & Kallman, 2001). The RMS record system indicated that 1,853 members left during the period, but contact details were available for only 843 of the former members. Subsequently, 40 of these were found to have been incorrectly identified as having left CFA, when they were actually in the process of transferring to another Brigade. Of the 803 actual “leavers” sent a questionnaire, 125 were “unknown at this address”. A total of 166 completed surveys were returned (24% of the 678 surveys delivered). Of the 166 returns, 19% stated that they left CFA because they moved (employment, study, family reasons). If we apply this figure (19%) across the sample of 678 we get a notional number of 129. If we then add to this the 125 “not known at this address” former members we get a notional total of 254 former members who probably left CFA because they moved house, corresponding to 32% of the 803 “leavers” surveyed. If the assumptions in the calculation are accepted, that gives us an estimate that about two-thirds of resignations resulted from some factor other than simply leaving the area.

Woodward and Kallman (2001) analysed the 166 responses and concluded that the three major reasons for leaving (apart from moving house) were (a) time demands (26%); (b) negative Brigade issues (18%); and (c) training demands (12%).

- (a) Time Demands: the three kinds of time demands described were work commitments (51%); family commitments (25%); and personal commitments (21%).
- (b) Negative Brigade Issues: the five issues described were demands of meetings and call-outs (27%); lack of recognition by the organisation (25%); interpersonal conflict (25%); lack of leadership opportunities (10%); and nepotism (9%).
- (c) Training Requirements (internal training and skills maintenance): the two aspects described were time demands (47%) and limited access to training opportunities (41%).

No other report on the reasons why volunteer firefighters leave has been located so far.

Exit Interviews and Surveys (EISs)

Many organisations use exit interviews and surveys (EISs) to obtain information from departing employees about their reasons for leaving. While exit interviews have the potential to generate detailed information, they require a degree of skill to conduct and are often time-consuming. Accordingly, many organisations use brief survey questionnaires instead.

Giacolone, Elig, Ginexi, and Bright (1995) observed that there are three reasons for an organisation using EISs. First, to obtain diagnostic and strategic information so as to (a) determine reasons for personnel turnover; (b) identify training and development needs; (c) create strategic planning goals, and (d) identify organisational issues requiring change. Second, as a public relations exercise: employees who are separating are given an opportunity to raise issues so as to engender more positive feelings toward the former employer. Third (and related to the second) to allow employees an opportunity to vent frustrations and dissatisfactions.

Discussion of the usefulness of EIS procedures centres on two issues, the trustworthiness of the information obtained and the utilisation of the information (eg, Garretson & Teel, 1982).

Garrett (2003) offered some guidelines for conducting effective EISs:

1. Publicise it throughout the organisation, make sure everyone knows about the procedure.
2. Make it universal and routine.
3. To increase the likelihood of honest responding, have someone neutral carry it out, not the employee's line supervisor. The neutral person could be from human resources, or an outside consultant retained for the purpose.
4. Use a brief and structured procedure. This increases the likelihood of getting useful information so as to be able to spot trends.
5. Act on the data, don't just collect it.

Clearly, any effective EIS system is going to cost. Staffing resources have to be allocated to carry it out and to manage the data generated. The actual procedure adopted must match the realities of the volunteer management system in place within a given organisation. Most rural fire services operate in a very de-centralised way, with local Brigades and Regions having closest contact with volunteers. Following the above principle of neutrality, if an interview was used there may be an advantage if human resources personnel conducted the interview by telephone. If a survey questionnaire is employed it would probably be best for this to be returned directly to a human resources unit rather than the Brigade or Region. The protocol being used by NSW Rural Fire Service (Attachment 1) illustrates use of a survey questionnaire (distributed by regional/district/zone managers, returned to the Manager Relations). The protocol being considered by the SA Country Fire Service is an example of a telephone-interview procedure (Attachment 2).

A possible option for the future could be an anonymous return email-survey procedure. At present, this is probably only feasible in the ACT, where an estimated 90-95% of volunteers have internet access.

References

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Martin Surrey (NSW RFS) and to Adaire Palmer (SA ESAU) for arranging permission to include the surveys from their agencies.

Further copies of this report are available from Mary Bertoldi, Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University: m.bertoldi@latrobe.edu.au.



1.1.17

Volunteer Exit Questionnaire

1 Rationale

- 1.1 This Service Standard has been issued to ensure that volunteer members choosing to leave the Service have the opportunity to provide suggestions regarding the ongoing improvement of the Service.
- 1.2 Information received will identify any trends or deficiencies and assist in the development of standards to inform the continuous improvement of service delivery.
- 1.3 Region/Zone/District managers will be advised of the relevant feedback where applicable.

2 Standard

- 2.1 The exit questionnaire is a voluntary survey to be completed upon termination with the Service
 - 2.2 The questionnaire may be completed anonymously (declaration of District is required), or you may elect to conduct an interview through the District office. The questionnaire may be located at on the RFS Internet website or your local district office.
 - 2.3 Completed questionnaire should be forwarded to the Manager Volunteer Relations (MVR) at Head Office.
 - 2.4 Where possible, volunteer members leaving the Service should be offered the following options:
 - (a) A copy of the questionnaire
 - (b) An exit questionnaire interview with the district manager
 - (c) A face to face questionnaire with the District Manager (or delegate) at a prearranged time and venue.
 - 2.5 All information received will be treated in the strictest of confidence in compliance with NSW Privacy and Personal Information Act 1998. Where applicable constructive information will be reported to the local responsible authority.
 - 2.6 The MVR will prepare and annual report of key issues and trends arising from the outcomes of exit surveys in September each year. This report will be presented to the CEG as part of its strategic planning input. In addition, the MVR will submit monthly reports to the Commissioner for CEG notation.
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NSW Rural
Fire Service

Service Administration (General)

3 Who is responsible for implementing this Standard?

Manager Volunteer Relations, regional/district/zone managers,

4 Issue

This Service Standard was considered by the Rural Fire Service Advisory Council on 2 September 2003 and issued by the Commissioner on 11 September 2003.

5 Legislation and references

6 Amendments

Title amended from Exit Questionnaire to 29 March 2004
Volunteer Exit Questionnaire

7 Document owner

The owner of this Service Standard is the Manager Volunteer Relations.



NSW Rural
Fire Service

Service Administration (General)



VOLUNTEER EXIT QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a voluntary questionnaire for members terminating their service with the RFS. All information provided will be treated in the strictest of confidence in compliance with NSW Privacy and Confidentiality legislation. Information provided will assist in the ongoing improvement of the Service

Note: If you wish to have an exit interview, it should be brought to your District Manager or Captain's attention as soon as possible, to ensure that arrangements for the interview can be made.

IDENTIFICATION

Name (optional): _____

Brigade (optional): _____

Position: (optional) _____

District: _____

Sex: Male Female

Length of Service in Current Brigade: Months Years

Length of Service with the RFS: Months Years

REASONS FOR TERMINATION OF SERVICE

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family or work commitments | <input type="checkbox"/> Retirement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of interest | <input type="checkbox"/> Resignation due to medical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Move to new area | <input type="checkbox"/> Resignation to travel or study |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grievance with other members | <input type="checkbox"/> Unhappy with Service direction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify): | |

If your decision to cease membership with the RFS has been based on a dissatisfaction with the direction of the Service please give details.



NSW Rural
Fire Service

Service Administration (General)

Would you consider volunteering with another organisation? Yes No
(Please give details)

HOW WOULD YOU RATE?

(1: Excellent

3: Mixed

5: Poor)

▪ Your overall experience with the RFS	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Learning and development opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Assistance with development outside the Service	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Access to Service documentation	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Access to support services	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Your own contribution to the Service	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Recognition of your work	1	2	3	4	5
▪ Satisfaction with the type of work	1	2	3	4	5
▪ The level of support and teamwork within your brigade	1	2	3	4	5
▪ The level of fairness and equity in your District	1	2	3	4	5
▪ The level of Service support (PPE, equipment, training, etc)	1	2	3	4	5
▪ The overall success of the Service in providing quality community services	1	2	3	4	5

DRAFT POLICY DOCUMENT AND TELEPHONE EXIT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL BEING CONSIDERED BY SA CFS

EXIT INTERVIEWS

1 COMMITMENT

- 1.1 The CFS is committed to collecting information that will assist in the development and delivery of services to its volunteers.
- 1.2 The CFS is committed to having formal documentation and analysis of reasons exiting volunteers discontinue their service.
- 1.3 The CFS is committed to conducting exit interviews with exiting volunteers on a regular basis.

2 AIMS

- 2.1 To collect data that is analysed and utilised for strategic planning purposes
- 2.2 To allow analysis of retention issues in isolation from recruitment issues.
- 2.3 To develop strategies that enhance the retention of CFS volunteer members.

3 BACKGROUND

The reasons for ceasing volunteer work are many, and for convenience are divided here into three main categories.

- 1 Some volunteers are lost through natural attrition (volunteers leaving for their own good reasons) or are lost through various forces that are not specific to any one particular organisation. Such losses do not represent a specific backlash against any one particular organisation, but rather represent more widespread socio-economic conditions and are in line with general volunteering trends.
- 2 Some volunteers may leave because they no longer derive satisfaction from volunteering with the CFS, but are not actually dissatisfied.
- 3 Some volunteers leave the service for reasons of dissatisfaction.

In each case, previously willing and able volunteers become unwilling or unable to volunteer. While the outcome is the same (the volunteer leaves the CFS) the appropriate response can be quite different. For category one, there might be little the CFS can or should do in responses to such losses, other than investigate in what ways it might be possible to enable those who are willing but unable to volunteer. In contrast, in categories 2 or 3 specific organisational issues might lie behind volunteers becoming unable and/or unwilling to volunteer. The CFS needs to be aware of these issues so that it can take the appropriate action.

Exit Interviews are also used for public relations purposes. They provide resigning volunteers with an opportunity to raise issues that are important to the volunteer at a personal level. This can facilitate a positive transition from CFS volunteer to a member of the general public. If exiting volunteers leave with positive feelings about their volunteering experience, they will be more inclined to speak positively of the organisation in the future.

ATTACHMENT 2

The cost of recruiting and training new volunteers makes high turnover an expensive way of doing business. Information gained by surveying exiting volunteers can reduce the cost of volunteer turnover by uncovering information about how the CFS can make jobs more attractive and satisfying to existing and new volunteers.

4 RELATED DOCUMENTS

- 4.1 Standards of Fire and Emergency Cover
- 4.2 National Standards For Involving Volunteers in Not For Profit Organisations (June 2000)
- 4.3 PSM Act Determination
- 4.4 Volunteer Motivations Report 2000

5 DEFINITIONS

- Interviewer
The person/persons or organisation engaged to undertake independent exit interviews.
- Data
Information that is gathered from the exit interviews with volunteers discontinuing their membership with the CFS.

6 STRATEGIES

The CFS will adopt a pro-active approach by;

- 6.1 Including all stakeholders when developing and reviewing the exit interview questionnaire.
- 6.2 Gathering diagnostic and strategic data, identifying problem areas, identifying training and development needs of volunteer members.
- 6.3 Analysing and using the data for strategic planning to enhance services to volunteers.
- 6.4 Informing new members they will be asked to complete a survey about their experience with the organisation following their resignation.
- 6.5 Ensuring data collected from individuals remains confidential to authorised parties only.
- 6.6 Ensuring data will only be used for strategic planning purposes from Brigade level to statewide level.

Contact Officer
Adaire Palmer
Volunteer Management Consultant
Telephone: 8463 4101
Emergency Services Administrative Unit

Euan Ferguson
Chief Officer
SA Country Fire Service

ATTACHMENT 2

SCRIPT FOR CFS EXIT TELEPHONE-INTERVIEWS

Name of Interviewer	
Date of call	
Time of call	
1 Telephone #	Introduction to former volunteer: Hello - I'm Mel / Mary / Bob. I'm interviewing former CFS volunteers about their experience with the CFS, see why they stopped volunteering, and ask for feedback for the CFS. It takes about six minutes. Is this a good time to talk? If yes: Great - thank you.
2 Alternative Time	If no: Would it be better to call back at a different time? If yes: If no:
START UP	
3 Motivation	Which do you think is the main reason you chose to volunteer with the CFS?
4 Satisfaction	And do you feel that you fulfilled this motivation while you volunteered with the CFS?
5 Sat / Commit	What did you enjoy most about volunteering with the CFS?
6 Sat / Commit	What did you enjoy LEAST about volunteering with the CFS?
7 Sat / Commit	What did you find most challenging about volunteering with the CFS? Challenging in a positive sense? Challenging in a negative sense?
8 Own role	Did you feel confident that you fully understood your role and responsibilities? Yes No
9 Supervision	Did you feel confident in the skills of your supervisor (technical and people)? technical people
10 Morale	How would you describe the morale of your brigade? On a scale of 1-5. Very low 1 to very high 5.
11 Communication	Did you feel well informed about CFS policies and procedures? Yes. No - please specify.
12 Resolution	If you had something (a complaint or serious request) to be resolved, was it.. resolved quickly? resolved - but it took a while... no-one seemed prepared to address it. not applicable
13 Time	Were you satisfied that the time you spent on CFS duties was about right for you?
14 Pressure	Did you feel pressured to put in more time than you really wanted to?
15 Control-time	Did you feel free to accept or turn down work according to your time constraints?
16 Appropriateness	Were you satisfied that the sorts of work you did was what you'd volunteered to do?
17 Control-type	Did you feel free to accept or turn down work according to the type of work it was? Did you feel that your efforts as a volunteer were recognised and appreciated?
8 Apprec-public	by the public?
19 Apprec-CFS	by the CFS?
20 Apprec-govt	by the government?
21 Train-safe	Were you satisfied that you had the right training to do your duties safely?
22 Train-efficient	Were you satisfied that you had the right training to do your duties efficiently?
23 Train-amount	Overall, did you feel the training was too much / just right / too little?

ATTACHMENT 2

- 24 Satisfaction Overall, do you feel satisfied with your experiences while a CFS volunteer?
- 25 Satis-rank Could you rate your satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is not at all satisfied, and 5 is very satisfied?
- Rank
- 26 Feelings at time At the time you left, how happy were you feeling about your experiences with the CFS?
(unhappy 1; neutral 2; happy 3)
- 27 Reason-specify What do you think is the main reason you decided to stop volunteering with the CFS?
- Category 1 Moved out of the area...
 - Category 2 Retired; felt like I was too old to continue being a CFS volunteer...
 - Category 3 Ill health / medical reasons...
 - Category 4 Family commitments...
 - Category 5 Commitments to paid work...
 - Category 6 Commitments to other volunteer work...
 - Category 7 Unhappy with brigade (or higher level) management...
 - Category 8 Unhappy with direction of the CFS as an organisation...
 - Category 9 Lost interest in the CFS...
 - Category 10 Didn't feel there was a role for me in our brigade.
 - Category 11 Dispute with another member...

 - Category 12 Asked to leave; suspended; dismissed...
 - Category 13 Other (SPECIFY)
- 28 Catalyst Did something extra act as a catalyst to actually make you leave? What was it?
- 29 Freedom-leave Did you delay leaving the CFS for any reason?
In your opinion, what are the top three things you would want to see changed in the CFS or the messages that you think they really need to take on board?
- 30 Change1
- 31 Change2
- 32 Change3
- Would you like to have the results of this study sent to you?
- 33 Contact-results If yes: Where would you like the results to be sent?
If no: That's fine.

CLOSE

Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.
This will be very useful in helping the CFS make sure it meets the needs of its volunteers.